A collection of short stories by

MARGARET DRURY GANE

Dedicated
To the Unbounded Circle of
Family, Friends and Acquaintances
of Margaret.

Copyright © 2007 by the Trustees of the Estate of M. D. Gane

Photo by James T Gane

CONTENTS

Sometimes The Machine Will Prompt	1.
The Triumphant Return Of Fred Angle	9.
A Few Words Before Dinner	24.
The Frog And The Pail	44.
Subway Song	47.
The Wallpaper Man	57.
November Argument	68.

1

SOMETIMES THE MACHINE WILL PROMPT

It started long before I was born because I've heard my parents telling people that they talked to me in the womb and laid the walkman playing classical music against my mom's stomach every night right after dinner.

This wasn't all. Apparently they bought season tickets for the opera and the ballet, took turns reading Shakespeare in loud voices - so I'd hear them through all the gurgles, I guess - and were careful to only watch public television. They did these things for nine months because as deeply as some people believe in God, my parents are convinced that superior intellect is mainly the product of a strictly structured environment. The trouble is, when they tell their friends about the dynamic mix of stimuli they provided before my birth - everyone turns to smile expectantly at me, and because I don't want them to think it was a waste of time I try to do something intelligent to prove it worked - like getting that dumb disc in the round hole, or banging the yellow and red buttons on the Spectrum Toy so the orange dog will jump up. After all, I don't want anyone to think it was a waste of their time, do I? Anyway, after all the prenatal cultural instruction I can't remember, I was finally born on August 11, at 3.15 in the morning, an event momentous enough to be announced in our local newspapers as well as in Vancouver, where my Uncle Brock lives. Along with a slew of congratulatory cards they received after the big day, my parents framed this announcement and hung it on the Ego Support Wall above the crib in my bedroom.

Whenever I'm cranky or balk at crawling around the Learning Stations, my mom reads it to me just to confirm how wanted I was. But it's a gush of gratitude that runs on for seven inches of newspaper, so see if you don't agree it sounds more like relief than welcome:

Simon Wright and Amanda Gossard-Wright are ecstatic at the safe arrival of Leontyne Bristol Reva, 7 pounds, 3 ounces, born under the propitious sign of Leo! The grandchild Betty and Ron Gossard have been yearning for, a cousin for Chilton and Hager, first niece for Jody and Sydney Wright, and Brock Gossard. Special thanks to cab driver Tony Genova who got us to Riverview Hospital in time, and head nurse Phyllis Henning and the super supportive labour room team. Thanks, guys! And our unbounded gratitude to a terrific gynecologist, Doctor Marilyn Blair and her truly superb delivery room crew. Needless to say, Simon and Amanda are bursting with pride!

I sometimes wonder what all those people thought when I was placed on my mom's stomach and my dad said, "Go ahead and hum it to her, Amanda, so she'll know she's outside now." He was referring to Beethoven's Ode To Joy, one of the pieces they'd been playing to her stomach all those months. But I'd been living inside my own water world for so long all I probably noticed was a slight human earthquake and a hollow rumble under my right ear.

My first three months are a sleepy blur of arms, blankets and breasts. Not until I could finally focus my eyes was I aware of the giant faces smiling over the crib or the mobile of brightly coloured shapes that bobbed above my

head. So it must have been some kind of breakthrough the evening my mom called out in a sound that made me jump: "Simon! Come here! She's staring at them!" Before I know it my dad was holding the mobile absolutely still as his voice took on a new urgency. "Leontyne? Are you focusing? Good girl! This is the plus sign, this one's a minus. Here's our divider and here's the multiplication symbol. Oh look! When I let go, the signs swing around again. The plus, the minus -"

I didn't know it then, but the moment those magical free-floating shapes were stopped in mid-air was the first giveaway that life, even at three months, wasn't going to be a spectator sport. From then on, just let me focus on something too long, or my hand jerk involuntarily toward anything, and no matter where we were, the world stopped while I was taught another lesson. "That's *broccoli*," my mom would quickly identify. "Broccoli is a *green* vegetable."

"*Dark* green, actually." My dad was a stickler for accuracy. "Remember the green plus sign? Well, broccoli is an *Italian* name for this *green* vegetable. And it's so good for us, isn't it?"

To tell the truth, I liked broccoli a lot better when I thought it was a small tree, and all I really learned from these sessions was to dread the sound of my name, which began to bong like a school bell calling me to an endless lecture. Leontyne. Leontyne. It meant, stop whatever you're thinking and *pay attention*.

I didn’t know it, of course, but they had a lot more in mind than fun when they dangled my Napoleon doll out of reach a few feet ahead of me, encouraging me to crawl.

Since I was getting sick of rocking back and forth on my knees, I obliged them by doing it right away, and what a feeling! Hands and knees coordinated - aim, crawl, and I was across the room! The first thing I could do by myself! But no sooner was I whizzing forward, sideways and even backward, than I was scooped up and carried into our living room, a place I loved because it had low furniture and a thick rug to play on. Not anymore. Everything had changed. Suddenly my zig-zagging crawl was narrowed to a strip of bright yellow carpet called The Progress Path which wound past little tables marked HISTORY, ARCHITECTURE, ART, MATH, SCIENCE, each one crammed with strange stuff.

The whole room had been transformed into something called Learning Stations!

When I saw what they'd done I burst into tears, but my mother promptly dropped to her knees and crawled along beside me. If this was going to be a race, I loved it, because for the first time in my short life I knew I had the winning edge. In no time I was broken -field-crawling like a mad thing- until she stopped me cold by blocking my path with her body: we'd reached the first Learning Station. "Oh, foreign *languages*!" she whooped, pretending it was a surprise to her, too. "Let's see what's under the Blue marker. Baw-joor! Hello', in *French*!"

It didn't take too long for me to realize why my mom or dad always crawled with me. Ploughing along the Progress Path as fast as I could go wasn't allowed: wasn't the point, so my parents were like outriders on a race course, herding me gently but firmly toward the Learning Stations where a whole new world of dynamic intellectual experiences waited for me.

I soon understood that doing what they wanted was smarter than putting up a fight along the way. Obedience got me to the end of the yellow Progress Path much faster - the Snack Station, where I was rewarded with chocolate chip cookies and juice, and better still, fifteen minutes of Free Time.

Yet, when I'm in bed listening to tapes of Lullabies From Around The World, I sometimes wonder, why *me*? I *am* smart. Why do I have to be smarter? And why can't we have a real living room back again? I know my cousins don't have to go through this because their living room looks like ours did before the Path and the Stations were put in, and all they have to listen to at night is each other, and the snoring of Jerome, the old pug who sleeps on the hairy mat between their beds.

That's what I love about going to their house. Hager and Chilton don't seem to know or care that I'm going to be a genius or that they probably aren't. They just take my hand and walk me around their messy bedroom and let me play with stuff that doesn't seem to have much purpose at all, so we can invent our own. Last time I was there, Hager showed me the present he got for Christmas, a box that lit up, and when he pressed different buttons, letters and pictures appeared on the screen. The great thing about Hager is that he doesn't do a lot of explaining: he just sat me on his knee and let me push whatever I wanted. Then, whatever came up Chilton would repeat, yelling the words at the top of his voice. 'SORRY! TRY AGAIN! HI THERE! I'M AN EL-E-PHANT! 2 & 3 = 5!' Everything I did seemed to send Chilton into hysterics, but the one that nearly made him fall right off the chair came up whenever I bopped the silver button.

"Look what she's got, Hager! SOMETIMES THE MACHINE WILL PWOMPT!"
"She won't understand that, Hager said. "You don't know what that means, do you, Leontyne?" I shook my head. "It means it will help you if you punch the orange button." I didn't find it right away because on my Spectrum Toy I was so used to punching in red plus yellow to get an orange anything. When I finally found it, the screen was filled with familiar shapes, and right away Chilton was shouting, "PUMPKINS! A MARMALADE CAT! CAWWOTS! A TWAFFIC LIGHT!"

For a couple of visits we were pretty much left alone to play while my folks and my aunt and uncle talked downstairs. When it was time to go, my mom would call me from the stairway and the boys would take me down. But this afternoon the three of us were getting crazier and crazier - me wildly hitting any old button on the machine, Chilton lisping out instructions at the top of his voice and even the usually quiet Hager screaming with laughter. I loved it because I seemed to make them happy, and that's a lot of power for someone as young as I am. But this day my dad was in the doorway saying it was time to go home, and the room became very quiet. Hager showed me the button that shut off the machine, and the familiar Happy Face appeared, its stick-arms waving good-bye and letters bouncing over its head. As always Chilton blurted, "EXIT! EXIT!" but with my dad standing over us, the nuttiness had gone from his voice. To me, it suddenly felt as if their bedroom had turned into our living room.
"Leontyne?" *Bong. Pay Attention*. "Exit means we're leaving," my dad said in his reasonable way. "Exit is Latin, from *exitus*. Remember? You've seen that word at the end of the Progress Path."

That's when Chilton escaped around the corner to the bathroom, missing most of the lesson, and it was hard to tell what Hager was thinking because he was looking at me, not my dad, and he had this really strange, sad look on his face.

I had my third birthday last week, and to celebrate, two more Learning Stations were added: LITERATURE and CLASSICAL MUSIC. I can walk to them now instead of crawling, but still the Progress Path never seems to change. To me, it looks like it will be there forever, just like the sidewalk outside our house. I've been taken around the block to my cousin's house so often that I know where the sidewalk goes, too.

"Leontyne? Our block isn't square, like a toy block. Ours is one big circle, like the globe or the moon. That means there are no streets to cross. Let's see if you remember what we pass on our way around the circular block. First, the white house. Then Mrs. Fowler's yellow gate. The red fire hydrant, the big blue house,

-then the bushes that look like broccoli, and the dog that isn't orange or purple, barking meanly behind a black fence. Then the ugly monster house with frozen lions by the verandah - now we turn the corner -

"-and let's count five houses together. One, two, three, four, five and you know this one! Hager and Chilton's house. No, we can't stop, darling. We have the reading lesson when we get home, remember? So, what do we look for next? The garage with a hoop on it. And what do we call it? Right! Good for you! A basketball hoop!"

This is my half-hour of Free Time, and my mom's too, because I can hear her talking on the phone about finding a really excellent private school for me next year, one that has hundreds of stimulating intellectual challenges. Funny that today she should be telling whoever it is what a wonderful memory I have because that's what I'm going to use to exitus out of here.

Our front steps are easy. There are only two, and there's a low railing to hold on to. This might be the day those big cans that look like outdoor Learning Stations are parked along the curb, but I'm not going to stop, even if they are full of interesting junk. I'll just follow the circle past the broccoli and all those things I've learned by heart. Then I'll turn the corner, and count to five. And if I'm lucky, Hagar and Chilton will be waving from their window, calling me in. ◂

9

THE TRIUMPHANT RETURN OF FRED ANGLE

Parks like ours can still be found in most of the small rural towns you see folded into valleys throughout the countryside. Bench-rimmed parks with trees older than my grandfather, and not a plastic playground, imitation rock or klieg floodlight in sight. Instead of constant change with all its upgrading pitfalls, age is treasured, and the town's memories are literally cast in stone with pebbled drinking fountains, cement wading pools embedded in the grass, and more often than not, the haunting permanence of a war memorial. Our monument is a lanky infantryman, cap in hand, who leans comfortably on the butt of his World War One rifle and stares toward Main Street as if he's expecting a friend to meet him at any minute. Even our local garden club prefers the familiar to the exotic. Year after year, season after season they produce the park's comfort garden of recognizable tulips, roses and chrysanthemums.

It's the kind of scene city people are urged to conjure up while they belly-breathe their way through stress-reducing exercises. I just have to stroll a couple of blocks south of my house, and there it is, the reward I give myself for having to commute every day to a tower where computers waft their weird cordite smell into an office with permanently sealed windows. Unlike city parks, ours holds no nasty surprises, invites no sudden strangers. Most likely anyone who turns up will be recognized from past encounters in the general store or the waiting room of the walk-in clinic.

And yet - no sooner have I said that than the exception bows dramatically into my mind. Enzo Pasqualino, who slowly circled the park, then politely asked if I minded company before easing himself down beside me on a bench in the feeble March sun.

Enzo looked like no one else in this baseball-capped and windbreakered town. He was wearing a belted polo coat with notched collar turned up against a chilly wind, a beige fedora slouched over straggling wisps of silver hair, and a burgundy silk scarf. Just the sort of snappy outfit you'd see in an old John Barrymore movie.

"I *hate* these blasted rubbers," he said pleasantly, and lifted a foot to display a sludgy example capped over his elegant brown oxford. "They do terrible things to a good shine, you know. But I'm too old to clomp around in winter boots and I refuse to wear galoshes. You're a resident here, are you?"

I told him that Jenny and I had moved out here from the city five years ago, and loved it. "Much better environment for children, I imagine. You have children?"

I told him about two year old Rachel, and the baby boy we were expecting in a couple of months. The fact that we already knew the baby's sex seemed to puzzle the old man, so I skipped the technology and said we'd opted for preparation this time instead of surprise. "It's simper. Clothes- *you* know. And names, too."

"Ah yes, names. Often a problem. Have you chosen one then?"

"We're working on it." There was no point in explaining that Jenny has a thing for first names that sound like a law-firm door - *Dunlop, Harrington, Pryce* - or hint at intriguing foreign ancestors we haven't got, like *Sven* or *Nikolai*.

Suddenly the old man turned, eyes glinting, and demanded to know if I liked music.
"Music? Oh sure. When I have time to listen to it."
"They say I sang in my crib," he declared. "Obviously an attempt at early vocalizing, since singing became my whole life. Opera. Oh, I know, I know, " he added hastily, "despite the Three Tenors, not everyone's cup of tea, is it?" No reprimand in his tone, just patient resignation.
"You were an *opera* singer?" This was about as remote from anything I'd experienced as his clothes were from anything I'd wear, but it didn't matter. I'd turned the right key and the old man dove happily into the subject that I realized brought him over to my bench in the first place.
"Yes. Lyric tenor in the beginning, *spinto* as the tone darkened." Then, in a thin fluting voice, he began to send a song in the general direction of the stone soldier.
When he realized this, he stopped abruptly and said, "No, I think not. 'Thy Little hand is frozen'? Too ironic, too sad for that poor fellow, don't you think? Anyway, I'd rather sing it to Mimi, as I did when I was Rodolfo in *La Boheme* at the Metropolitan."
Pouncing gratefully on his mention of a familiar name I told him that Jenny and I had taken a tour through the Lincoln Center when we were holidaying in New York.
"But that's the *new* Metropolitan," he corrected gently. "Most of my great tenor roles were sung in the old house at Broadway and Thirty-Ninth. Faust, Don Jose, Mozart's wonderful Tamino? Glorious times, when I was young and the instrument performed perfectly!"

I didn't know what or who he was talking about, but I'd heard the same wistful ache in the voices of old athletes when they recalled young muscles that worked, reflexes

that responded "I wish I could have heard you," I told him truthfully, fumbling for something to prove it. "I've seen that Spanish singer on television, big good-looking guy -what's his name, anyway?" It was useless. Julio Inglesias kept getting in the way.
"You mean Placido Domingo, of course."
"Yeah, that sounds right."
"Splendid instrument! Superb tonal shading, great staying power, all so evident in his Aida! Oh, don't *I* remember the challenge of Aida, with the *Celeste* sung almost the moment the curtain rises, and that intense tomb scene still facing one in the last act! But I'll be honest, Mister Carpenter -"
"Tom, please."
"Tom, then, *if* you'll call me Enzo. Much as I loved Verdi, Puccini was better suited to my instrument. Fourteen curtain calls for my debut in Tosca as Cavaradossis!
Did you know that George Bernard Shaw declared Puccini to be Verdi's likely heir? Shaw wrote that in a review twelve years before I was born and ten years *after* this park was -" But suddenly his voice gave out, and it occurred to me that he probably hadn't anyone to talk to but himself and this effort was tiring him. I was about to give him some time to catch his breath, but as if he'd remembered the answer to something I'd asked him, he suddenly leaned toward me and told me that Enzo Pasqualino was not his real name.
"You're kidding!"
He shook his head. "No. I'm afraid I'm a bit of a fake in that regard. In my day, you see, impresarios and audiences were more impressed by foreign stage names. So ballet dancers became modishly Russian -*Natasha, Boris* and so on - while opera singers rushed to adopt Italian names."

"So you're not *Enzo*? What's your real name then?"
"Fred. Fred Angle. Can you picture *that* on the Met's marquee?"
"*Fred Angle*," I said it slowly, trying to give its garage-mechanic bluntness some sense of operatic glamour. My attempt made Enzo laugh, a raspy gargle I blamed more on lack of practice than on old age.
"There!" he cried. "You see what I mean? At first I thought of changing it to Fred*rico* Angelioni, but it sounded -well, too heavenly. In the end I hunted through the phone book, and presto, Enzo Pasqualino was born. A name more at home among the Giglis and Carusos, wouldn't you say?"
"Oh absolutely." Even if my only information had been gleaned from the old Mario Lanza movie, at least Enzo had used another name I'd recognized. "Speaking of Caruso," I said, "did you ever meet him?"
"Only once, near the end of his lamentably short life. I was singing *Il Trovatore* in Paris in a blistering heat wave -" he poked my arm with surprising hardness - "no air-conditioning *then*! And after the performance Caruso himself appeared in my dressing room." 'My dear Enzo,' he said, 'I join all Paris in making humble obeisance.' I was so excited I had to walk the streets for hours just to calm myself down!"
This I understood. "God, it must be incredible to meet your idol and then have him a compliment you like that!"
Perhaps because he expected lightning to strike when he spoke, Enzo didn't answer right away. "Ah - well, Tom. Let me confess something else. Caruso was *not* my idol. *My* idol appeared much later in my career."
"Jan Peerce?" I threw in eagerly, recalling how *The Bluebird of Happiness* had zapped around my parents'

house for six frantic months. Enzo smiled. "Admiration without envy, Tom. A clear, shimmering instrument, and one of Toscanini's favourite tenors, by the way. But a touch too shrill for my taste. No, it was Jussi Bjoerling who touched my heart."
He kissed his fingertips, spinning a phantom salute to the treetops. "Juicy-?" I said, still lost among the bluebirds. "I can't -"
"What I'd have given to *project* like that and still retain his aching sweetness of tone! Only in the young Pavarotti does one sometimes detect the same -" But our townhall clock interrupted the old man's tribute with four off-key and tinny chimes. "Oh dear, is it that time already? Better get back before Sunset Villa sends out the Saint Bernards." He stood up, fussing the handsome coat into place. "Mind you, this park's *very* pleasant. Like the town. Nice clean, quiet place."

But he'd said it too strongly, as if he had to convince himself, and no wonder. What I saw around Enzo were all the trappings of a life he could only enjoy in memory: vast and glittering cities with low-slung limos and floating capes and raptuous fans waiting for his autograph at the stage door.
"Look," I told him, "I'll be here again to-morrow. I'm sorry I don't know anything about opera, but I really enjoy hearing you talk about it."
Enzo said, "Well, suppose I look for you after lunch then? By the way, perhaps you'd like to know that if *you* sang you'd be a baritone. Fine dark timbre in your voice, good projection. I think you'd make a very impressive Scarpia."
He moved slowly across the grass, and when he reached the soldier, turned in the abrupt and stagey manner of old exiting actors and barked: "Suppose I promise that from

now on I won't talk so much about music?"
"No, no! Really, it's okay, I *like* it -" But by then Enzo was headed toward Sunset Villa and tea-time, and wasn't listening.

To give Jenny a break, I began bringing Rachel with me whenever the April evenings were warm enough. This didn't seem to affect Enzo one way or the other. He'd either ignore her or reach to absently pat her hand when she jabbered something unintelligible. Tenors were still his favourite subject, but one particularly lovely evening he surprised me by mentioning the name of a woman for the first time - Pilar, who still stands out in my mind as a single memorable signature, like Streisand or Sinatra.
"Was Pilar a singer, too?" Enzo shot me a look of dismay, and I realized again how irritating it must be, having to explain every name, every operatic term to me. This time he didn't even try. "I was scheduled to do *Tosca* with a young soprano I'd never worked with," He said briskly, "though she already had a reputation for being difficult, a prima donna. Very evident when she was late for our first rehearsal. I tried not to get angry. Very bad for the vocal chords and one's concentration. But after she'd kept me cooling my heels for nearly an hour, then sauntered in without a *word* of apology, I lost my temper."
"Well," I began, "whether it's business or opera, you expect -"
"*Co-operation*!" Enzo shouted, propelling a panicky Mourning Dove into a tree. "From stage hands to stars, teamwork is essential!"
"So how could you possibly sing with her after that?"
"*Or* convey my undying love for this particular Tosca, you might ask? In fact I'd have gladly shoved her off the prison wall myself - oh, but I forget.

You don't know the plot of *Tosca*, do you?" He corrected that by tearing through the story at top speed. "- and when Tosca's lover is executed she commits suicide by leaping from the parapet. Now, to answer your question. When Pilar sang, I forgot her bad manners, her selfishness, even the warning Scarpia gave me that she tended to blow tenors off the stage. I forgot because she *wasn't* Pilar any more, she was Floria Tosca, luminous, courageous, her devotion to my Cavaradossi totally believable!" A new softness in his voice made me ask if he'd fallen in love with her. "Oh yes, and it was very easy, believe me. When the curtain fell, the two of us held hands through endless standing ovations, pelted with flowers and deafened by bravos. A vocal match made in heaven, one reviewer said"... Enzo broke off briefly as Rachel began to whimper... "While it lasts, it's divine. But in the end, what happens on the stage is all illusion, of course. One has to learn to accept that."

When I told him it would still be a great ending to hear that he'd married her, Enzo the Romantic proved to be more realistic than I thought. "Pilar married? Affairs along the way and more triumphs over idiots like me, but nothing more permanent than that. Just as well. I've heard she's quite strange now, given to curtseying to a phantom audience in some rooming house in Athens."

By now Rachel's whimper had swelled to a tired whine and I could tell Enzo was relieved when I stood up to go. "I won't be seeing you again 'til Saturday, Enzo. I have to fly to Chicago for a motivation seminar."

"Oh yes?" he said vaguely, as lost in my world as I was in his. But then he did something I've noticed old people often do when they don't want to deliver a message directly to the parent: he delivered it to Rachel instead.

"You tell daddy what he's missing by not listening to the great operas, my dear. Then he'd know what Enzo is *talking* about, wouldn't he?"

Three days of intense lectures made me grateful for just about any diversion at night, but I guess Enzo's remark got to me because the last evening in Chicago I actually watched Carmen on public television, the whole enchilada, including intermission interviews. And because I could now imagine a virile young Enzo and the dynamic Pilar in the lead roles, I enjoyed most of it. And now I could ask Enzo intelligent questions, like, how did he cope when a co-star belted an aria right in his ear, and had anyone ever been hurt in that realistic stabbing scene outside the bull ring? Not exactly brilliant musical insights maybe, but I hoped he'd be pleased with even that small beginning. So the next Saturday, eager to show my progress, I walked to the park only to discover Enzo -on what I'd come to think of as our bench- talking to an old woman with an explosion of brittle red hair and brass earrings as big as wind chimes. Enzo made room on the bench, and explaining that she'd moved into Sunset Villa while I was away, introduced me to Mrs. Inge Fischer. "Don't let me interrupt," I insisted, though it occurred to me that Enzo's new captive audience might welcome some relief because he was going on about that difficult tenor solo coming just after the curtain went up, and how he was never satisfied with his *Aida* -all the old familiar ground he'd marched me over three weeks ago. But the pattern was suddenly shattered by Mrs. Fischer, who'd not only rewritten my part but had given it an authoritative German accent as well. "Such udder nonsense! *I* saw your Radames and you were perfect!"

"You *saw* me?""
Enzo shot upright, his glance sharpening as he tried to single out this one red-headed blur from an audience he'd sung to so long ago.
"Berlin," Inge trumpeted, "and I can even tell you the year! August 1936. And *terrible* weather, storms and lightning, bedder for Wagner than Verdi, yah? By the time I got inside I was soaked to the skin."
"Good Lord," Enzo whispered, pressing a hand to his heart. "Oh, it didn't madder," Inge said airily, mistaking his shock for concern. "When you sang I forgot the line-up, the storm, everything." The shock to Enzo, of course, was Inge Fischer. I mean, what were the chances that he'd meet an authentic and admiring fan *any*where these days, much less in a town like this? One in several million? He'd have to be far more used to people like me, who, if they hung out long enough to listen to him at all, couldn't make a single informed statement in return. Now here was someone who not only shared his knowledge of opera, but who could give Enzo back what I suspected he missed most, his audience and the distant sound of applause. Still, this didn't make Inge Fischer a moon-eyed worshiper by any means. She had definite opinions of her own which soon caused loud and prickly exchanges between them. Like the afternoon when I was in hot pursuit of Rachel as she bolted toward the park perennials, and I heard Inge's voice soaring in the guttural mix of praise and punishment that was becoming familiar. "Oh, Gott, Enzo! Not *again*? Puccini Puccini! I'm sick and tired of hearing that you were never bedder than when you were singing Puccini!"
"It's *true*!" Enzo bellowed. "My voice was better suited to-"

"I know, I know," Inge interrupted testily. "Tosca, Budderfly, Boheme, you've *told* me already. So, why didn't you sing his Turandot, I wonder?"

It's hard to tell who's winning when you don't know what people are arguing about, but Enzo soon made it clear who the opera expert was in this duo. He crossed his scrawny silk-clad legs and smiled. "Ah, but Turandot was worlds, no, *years* apart from Boheme, Inge. It was Puccini's deliberate attempt to break away from the gentler style of his earlier works. A masterpiece, but too hard on a voice like -"

"Ridiculous!" Inge shot back. "I suppose that's your excuse for not attempting *Othello*?"

Now Enzo was angry. "I could name *three* famous tenors who ruined their voices singing the Moor!"

But he was beginning to sound besieged, so I'd just decided I'd amble back and rescue him with my relaxing ignorance when Inge backed off. Plunking a pudgy hand on the old man's knee for what could only have been emphasis, she said, "But don't you see, Enzo? It's a *comp*liment. When I was young, I thought Enzo Pasqualino could sing *any*thing - yah, even Wagner."

This pleased Enzo so much that he produced a bag of wine gums from his pocket. "Oh, I admit there were times when I envied the helden tenors their Wagner, but don't we all yearn to be what we cannot be?"

Fred Angle should know, I thought.

"And who *was* your favourite helden?" Inge asked, her instant list of possible choices cutting me adrift again.

"In the early days? Melchior. But when I heard Jon Vickers' Sigmund, he supplanted everyone else before and after. Such heroic stage presence, such humanity in the approach! He took my breathe away -"

Apparently wine gums couldn't buy off Inge for long because she leaped in mid-sentence to scold Enzo again: "I still say you could have sung *Die Meistersinger*. Walter's role isn't *that* demanding!"

For Enzo's sake, I didn't really mind being blitzkrieged off the bench by Inge's operatic know-how, but on my way home that afternoon I realized how much I'd miss the old man if I couldn't come up with a new way of keeping his friendship. I considered taking him for drives in the country, but somehow pastoral pursuits didn't fit Enzo, a city cat already chafing at the limits Sunset Villa and this tiny town placed on him. So how about I drive him into the city instead? This seemed like a great idea until I remembered that Inge would likely invite herself along, and I pictured my small car reverberating with their high-decibel debates, and me stumbling out after hours of confinement, nearly deaf and claustrophobic with culture.

I'd almost resigned myself to the role of stagehand, the helpful shadow loping around the perimeter of Inge and Enzo's relationship, when something happened that changed everything.

On our way home one evening, Rachel began making a repetitive song out of her favourite word, *no*, an irritating habit Jenny and I were doing our best to ignore. I tried distracting her with my upbeat rendition of Eensy-Weensy Spider, but her "no" only got louder, and she added a angry rocking rhythm that made the stroller difficult to steer. It took me a couple of blocks to finally figure out what was driving her crazy: Rachel wasn't saying no, she was trying to say *Enzo*, and when I finally caught on, we made a duet of the old man's name, her zedless version echoing my complete one.

That's when the obvious suddenly dawned. Here, dinning in my ears, was the answer to cementing Enzo's friendship *and* naming our son, due to be born in a couple of weeks but still anonymous, poor kid. Even if Enzo hadn't shown a shred of regret that he'd never spawned his own tiny tenor, I knew he'd be pleased that we wanted to commemorate him in a personal and lasting way. And the fact that Rachel had picked out this intriguing foreign name was sure to make her Mom happy.

Jenny and I spent that night hunting for a middle name, pairing then rejecting one after another until, almost as an afterthought, she came up with her father's name, Frederic. That should be traditional enough for me, she said, and didn't it sound great with the more exotic Enzo? What she didn't know until I told her was that Frederic also happened to be Enzo's *real* name, the one he'd dumped when he'd turned himself into an Italian tenor over sixty years ago.

I found him sitting alone on the bench, his cream jacket open to the sun and a handsome ivory panama hat shading his face. I decided not to tell him right away.

I remembered Chicago, and the questions I hadn't had a chance to ask him. "Enzo? I've been wondering. Was Carmen ever hurt in that final scene? It looks pretty realistic."

"Oh yes, though thankfully not in any of my performances. Poor gypsy! Once or twice the prop knife didn't retract."

"And those big duets. You know, both singers belting at the top of their lungs? How do you cope with that?"

Enzo was smiling, obviously pleased with me. "Watch next time, Tom. We turn slightly forward, project into the audience. Or back off. Simple."

There was a comfortable silence while we breathed in the green air. "So, where's Inge off to today?" I asked him.
"Confined to barracks with a bad cold." Enzo said. "I'm staying well out of range, a singer's precaution. Old habits die hard. And how's your family?"
"Just fine. And by the way, we've finally decided on a name for the baby."
"I'm sure it's a relief." As usual Enzo's good manners masked his boredom with domestic matters. "I hope you insisted on Thomas?"
"No more Thomases," I told him. "We've picked something more unusual."
"Ah. Such as?"
I said it very slowly. "What do you think of -Enzo Frederic Carpenter?"
It took a moment to sink in, and I had to repeat it. When he finally realized what I'd said, Enzo turned pink as the park tulips and gave one of those theatrical gasps he usually reserved for the declaration of somebody's operatic genius.
"*My* names? You're using both *my* names?"
"Everything but the Angle." I explained how the whole thing was really a lovely accident. Rachel's song had started it, and Jenny had picked Frederic out of the blue.
"I hope you don't mind. I mean, it's possible the little guy may turn out to be tone-deaf."
"Mind! But it's *La Forza Del Destino*! Verdi's force of destiny!" I nodded, pretending to understand.
"Everyone thought I was Italian when I deserted my past. Now we have the hero's deception finally exposed but forgiven though the innocent act of a child. Just the emotional reunion one wants in the last act of a splendid opera! No wonder your Rachel made an aria of it!"
I guess it shouldn't have surprised me that becoming the

plot of an opera appealed to Enzo more than having a baby named after him. For him, that was the best kind of commemoration. With plain old Fred Angle and the flamboyant Enzo Pasqualino united at last, his long life had come full circle. And there was something else, the absent audience whose applause he could still count on for any encore. "Won't Inge be pleased?" he said. "I can't wait to tell her." ◂

24

A FEW WORDS BEFORE DINNER

He was glad that on this visit he had some good news for him. A couple of times a month, Trevor Stanton made a point of dropping in at the old house, carrying guilt-gifts of Turkish delight, or cigarettes, occasionally a bottle of good whiskey. His father was a moderate drinker who limited himself to one glass every evening, so that liquor never seemed to seduce him into a change of mood. Curiously, it was the candy that altered him, at least temporarily. He'd sit back, stoned on the opaque gelatine sweetness, smelling like a rose, his sweater frosted with powdered sugar, to talk freely, almost happily. And because he was eighty-two, he rambled through a past that raged from child labour in a Kent mill, through the whole First World War with the 17th Lancers, emigration to Canada, The Depression, his business. Most of it came out sounding like the answer to an English prayer. Chaos lessened to simple hard times by courageous and never-say-die coping. How these doomed events could make him smile was a continuing mystery to his son; but they did. Lingering smiles as he re-visited the procession of bullies who caught him on his way home. Black eyes and stained-glass bruises worn like medals. Lances, puttees, malaria -and the morning when he woke in India to find George Ramsay knifed in the still mountain night by a silent enemy. His disdain for the tanks and roaring armour that had replaced his beloved horses. Where -he would ask his son, the last person who could give him an answer- where have all the horses gone?

That was why Stanton did not bring candy on this visit. He had something new to say, and he didn't want to wedge it between bread lines and a treatise on Mackenzie King. As the youngest son, much younger, he knew without malice that he had inherited the grind. Michael was settled long ago in Vancouver with a public relations outfit, and Rodney had left to head a German subsidiary firm that manufactured circuit boards for synthesizers. Since his father understood neither of these exotic pursuits, his pride in them was immense. He would talk of their distant success, which he tended to measure by miles trekked, so he did not really miss them. His sons' brief letters were read aloud, and he did not appear to notice that they were stale and dully repetitive. If he complained at all, it was to say that there was never enough mail. Quantity was the thing. Content took second place to the act of paper being shoved through the hall door slot to flop on the floor. The sight of his name scrawled or printed excited him, indicating that he continued to mean something in this world.

Stanton glanced at his watch, taping his fingers to the sound of Tom Jones on the dashboard radio. Traffic was dense and twitchy, until he made a left-hand turn off the main road and up the car-lined side street close to his home. He'd moved a year ago, enjoying the apartment where he could play records until Sunday dawn and leave whitened beer bottle circles on his table. No kindly remonstrations, no regular feeding hours, like the zoo. Stanton had decide that people should not have surprise children in their late forties. Eventually it turned the last one into two people, one a crutch to lean on, and the other a baby Dorian Gray for whom all things were possible. Sometimes, it seemed to Stanton that he must sustain his

father with contradiction -carry garbage cans and a teddy bear at the same time. Well, he loved him. And he had to admit he took the news of his moving with a minimum of fuss. If he worried about him, living alone in that empty house, Stanton wouldn't mention nursing home under any circumstances. The place was his little bit of England, a phrase his father like to use, generally after his fifth candy, and nothing would make him give it up. He slowed down, wheeling the company demonstrator into Dexter Street, experiencing the familiar bitter leap of nostalgia as he drew toward the clean, gaunt house. God, the place looked English enough. The square of lawn, green, weedless, and hedged lay neatly by a tumble of perennials, trumpeting his father's care. There was the lilac, a stubborn and arthritic clump that still managed to bear a couple of bleached blooms every spring. And there was his father's hand, as always curling like a human tie-back around the living-room curtain, watching for him.

Stanton went into his act then. Accelerating slightly, he turned sharply into the driveway, revving the motor, and jumped from the car like a visiting politician, grinning, smoothing his jacket front with his hand. He jogged lightly around the rump of the Shrimp his dealer was pushing this year, trotted by his father's drooping Union Jack, and bopped the bell. He did the same thing every time, to please the old man, to prove he couldn't wait to get there. His father liked people well and running.

When the door opened, Stanton hesitated, seeking out the old man's figure in the shadowy hall.

"You're squinting," his father said.

"Just trying to find you. Forgot my sunglasses. Hey, the garden's looking great. The, uh, things with all the colours-"

"The stocks? Yes, it's been a good year for them."

His father moved back against the door to make room for Stanton to pass. But as his son stepped in, he suddenly shot an arrow arm across his face. "See what the bastards have put up?" Stanton turned to see a flag larger than his father's, it's maple leaf a zig-zag of indistinguishable crimson in the still afternoon. "Supposed to make me mad," his father grumbled, slamming the door. "Why do you need sunglasses, anyway?" He walked into the living room and indicated a chair. Stanton undid his tie and sat down.

"There's a lot of rebound glare when you're driving around in this sun."

His father smiled faintly, shaking his head. "Yes, I suppose there is. I tend to think gadgets like that weaken us, though. Glasses, girdles, elevators. The muscles get lax, start to droop." He sat down on his hard oak chair as if it were a saddle -straddling his legs, letting his hands rest easily on his lap. He doubled a fist and pounded it abruptly against his thigh. "*Still* hard. That's walking, of course. And years of riding."

"You look good," said Stanton, relaxing in the cool room. Lace things spread over the chair arms, the mantel clock -none of it changed. He remembered his gift, sloping in the crook of his arm. "I bought you some Dewar's." He pulled the bottle from the thin brown bag and placed it on the walnut coffee table before his father, where it stood like a shadeless lamp.

"Well, that is nice of you. Reinforcements, eh? Even Doctor Creighton doesn't object to my nighty nip." Stanton knew why. His father shopped for a physician the way he did for shoes, looking for the perfect fit. Creighton was agreeable, partly retired, easily intimidated, and, most important, spent the appointment time nodding. "Well then, selling lots of cars, are you?"

"Yes," Stanton lied. His father was not fond of failure. Stanton hoped he'd skim the subject without plumbing the depths.
"Chivers still likes you?"
"Seems to". Stanton smiled, thinking how his father would hate Chivers if he really knew him. Chivers, with his chrome eyes and four on the floor morals, doling out Salesman of the Month stickers that ended any chance of friendship in the place. "I'm thinking seriously of leaving, though. The hours are terrible."
"Shouldn't think that would bother a boy of your age. Commission is rough, but I've been through all of that myself. And jobs aren't that easy to come by, are they, times being what they are-" He let that trail off with a look of watery caution, the indefinite summary he applied to everything; a war, recession, a boom, the market rising or falling. Stanton decided it was time to change the subject.
"I know, but I don' think I want to spend my nights peddling cars. I'm getting married." His father's laser eyes had strayed to the offending flag, leaping the distance to scald it out of sigh. "Dad?"
"Yes?"
"I'm getting married in two weeks."
"Really, then? Well, congratulations!" He struggled to assemble an expression of gruff regimental questioning. "Have I met the intended?"
"No, but we'll fix that little matter very soon. In fact, I thought we might have dinner together this weekend, get acquainted. I think you'll like her. She's a dental assistant. She wants to meet you, so we can discuss our plans, feel comfortable together-"
"What plans?"
"Well, the wedding. We both want you with us naturally.

Jan's sister is coming in from Ottawa, so I guess our side should shore up a little."
"Like a war, or a criminal case, eh?" The old man's laugh turned into a phlegmy five-minute cough and much hawking and mopping into a linen handkerchief. "Well there isn't much of our side left to invite, I should think. Aunt Cora, perhaps. But I can't see her coming. She's got colour telly in the Lodge and she's glued to it like an owl. She's ninety, y'know. But you don't visit her -so she says- so there'd be on point in asking her to a wedding, would there?"
"I had thought about it, no. She's probably got me mixed up with Mike, or Rod. I scarcely knew her. Anyway, it's not a big wedding, just quiet. We've booked for two weeks this Thursday, at four-thirty."
"Thursday? Isn't that an odd day? I didn't know churches married people in the middle of the week. But then women turn up for services in pants now, without hats-"
"Might be more interesting the other way around," Stanton said. "Well, don't get uptight about formalities, Dad. It's a civic ceremony, at the old City Hall. Simple, quick, and cheap. Jan's parents aren't loaded, so we decided this for ourselves. Jan and I".

His father moved back in his chair, pursing his thin mauve lips and making fan vaulting of the bony fingers propped beneath his chin. He looked like a wood carving, bloodless and still, elegantly carved, an extension of his chair. Stanton could sense his hostility, and it surprised him. Not once had it occurred to him that a casual ceremony would distress him, certainly not on the grounds of his religion, which he had left to languish in some hushed Anglican past. Stanton watched him in confusion, seeing the fierce pale eyes widen, and water, as they did when he heard the Christmas message from Buckingham

Palace. Or the time Stanton had taken him to the Mountie ride-past. None of this was what he had expected. He'd thought they'd break open a bottle and share an afternoon drink. There might be a short, evasive lecture on sex, delivered under stress, far too late. Okay. Fine, because he expected that. But he was suppose to be *pleased*, damn it all, not sit there like he was trying not to dissolve-

"Surely," his father said evenly, "you might have planned something less crass? I'm no churchgoer, never have been, except for regimental parades. And even if economics are a factor, church weddings can be small yet tasteful. City *Hall*? Where people are tried in court, and you pay parking fines? I don't believe it." He leaned forward, reddening so that veins snaked up his temples. "It isn't too late to change, to make other arrangements. Out of respect for your mother's memory, if for no other reason."

So, Stanton thought, there it was. Again. He had forgotten; in his own excitement, he had overlooked this morbid game. Mike and Rod went along with it, Stanton knew that from letters. *He's old, for God's sake, and takes care of himself. Let him alone.* But Jan didn't agree, especially now. And Stanton, who was no smoother, knew he couldn't go along with it, either. His father was pressing on now, urging him. All the moisture seemed to have centered in his eyes, leaving his throat dry and dreadful, so that he rambled like an ancient foreigner becalmed in his own house.

"Can't you understand?" he demanded. "We were dirt poor when we married, your mother and I. But we had something memorable. Music, a few friends around, the sense of permanence with the vows! And flowers. We were surrounded by the scent of roses."

"I know-"

"Sun pouring through tinted windows, everything that

makes the day stand out for the rest of your life."
"There's a bloody big one in the main foyer." Stanton wondered bleakly why he always made jokes when he was nervous. "They might let us have the service there."
"Don't make light of this, Trevor! Don't you make fun of me, I won't have it! That window is some kind of war memorial, though I confess it always smacked of Russia to me. All those industrial chimneys, and labourers. No. There'll be nothing even close to the feel of a church. Know what you'll get? Pots of dying chrysanthemums, a few words before dinner, and they'll hustle you out into the hall."

He was huffing for breath now, unable to sit still. His hard old hands explored the cardigan pockets for cigarettes, and he lit one, cupping the match against a non-existent wind. His eyes turned in misery to the photograph planted between twin pots of geranium on the mantel. It was a young picture of his wife, taken when her hair was brown, evenly parted, and crimped into stiff curls. She wore blue crepe with something puffing at the throat, and long pearls. It was not Stanton's favorite, since it was not typical of the memory he had of her. Still, her eyes had not changed as she aged. Dark and pleasant and patient, giving no sign of the turmoil inside. Grey smoke from his father's cigarette was deeply inhaled, to emerge in a thin blue streak after some strange chemical change in the caverns of his lungs.
"I'll say no more about it," his father said "It's up to you now -I'll make some tea."

It was a relief to be left symbolically in his room. No whisky, then. He heard the elaborate ritual taking place out in he kitchen, where the brown betty would be heated, the silver strainer brought out, the pot carried to the steaming kettle. The army had left his father with a

straight back and a passion for order.
"Here we are, then." The old man placed the tray beside his son with only a slight shaking of cups and spoons. "Let it steep a minute or two longer. It's a fresh pack, Breakfast brand. A little indulgence. Mrs. Addison does this very badly, I'm afraid. Tastes of tannic."
"Would you like me to find another housekeeper, Dad?"
"No, not at all. She's quite kind, in fact -certainly bearable three times a week. Besides, I've got her broken in now. She has an odd preoccupation with fluff, swoops about under the bed claiming it's full of germs. Remember Miss Prentice was a plant waterer? Killed every damned cactus in the place." He chuckled, halving a Peak Frean with one bite and swilling it around in amiable concentration. Can Jean cook? Make a good pot of tea?
"Jan? I guess so. I honestly haven't given it much thought."
"You're marrying late for a Stanton, y'know. How old are you -twenty-six or so?"
"Thirty-four. Last January."
"Let's see. Michael tied the knot at nineteen, much against your mother's wishes. But I could understand it. Same sort of slap-dash I had at that age. All balls. Marriage settled him down. Rodney was more serious, of course. Didn't do it till he was twenty-two." His father regarded him softly. "Can't recall what you were like, in that way. But I was forty-eight when you were born - not bad for my age, eh? Not a very demanding baby, I think, which we appreciated. The business was just getting back on its feet then, so it was pretty much up to your mother to pull you into shape. Say, do you remember the rocking-horse I bought you when you were five?"
"That was Mike's. I had it later, though. Rod told me it had been through several campaigns and that's where the

ear and tail had been lopped off."
"Have a biscuit, Trev. They're good. So -now you're the last Stanton to take the big leap. Well, I'm glad. I really am. I guess you've been having one high old time, but a man's got to settle sometime. I recall if we really wanted to gentle a stallion, all the sand-bags and leg-hobbling in the world couldn't compare to showing the bastard a good brood mare. Oh, he wouldn't turn to butter on the spot, but at least he channeled his energy in one direction!"
"Yes-"
"Nobody should live alone too long. I can vouch for that. Your mother and I had a good marriage. Oh, there were tight times, the Depression to get through-" he smiled, remembering. "But we made it, didn't we? Had a nice bunch of boys, too. I just hope that you and Jean-" The smile vanished, and he bit his lips to stop his chin from wobbling. Stanton said *Christ* to himself, knowing the signs, wishing good old Rod and Mike could drop through the bloody ceiling to see what he had to contend with. All those dutiful dull letters, sent off like company reports -what good where they when his father wanted to cry? He saw his father's face wrinkling, blotching with effort, and waited for the inevitable.
"For the love of God, Trevor! I wish you'd start this thing right, the way we did! For *her* sake!"

Maybe, Stanton thought, he should take his brothers' advice and let the old man march by choice into senility. But he did not know how to do it. Maybe it was easier by mail, thousands of miles away, deciding these things. But he was there, and nothing in him, nothing in his father's example, even, had prepared him to pretend.

"Now knock it off, Dad. Okay? Just stop. Because we've invited her too. Jan wrote her in Calgary, and she's coming out next week. Alone, if that makes you feel any better. Ralph doesn't feel he should interfere since it's -well, our family. You know, damn it, she *should* be able to stay here, not in a hotel. Don't you see that nobody thinks anything about divorce now? It just happens, and to an awful lot of nice people. If you keep up this crap you'll drive yourself nuts-"

Childhood shuddered back into the room as Stanton saw his father's eyes pinning him in black anger. "How dare you say that?" It was a raw, ugly sound. "How *dare* you?"

"Somebody has to. It's the truth, damn it! Maybe your marriage is dead, but my mother is still alive, and she's coming to the wedding! What in the hell are you going to say if she dies before you do, which isn't too likely? Are you going to say you're divorced?"

His father rose to leave, taking the tray and cups with tea still sloshing around in them, and left Stanton to look helplessly around at the fading beige walls, the paintings of the English country-side with their greenish pallor and grazing cows and ivory follies. Stanton got up and paced the room to calm himself. He could not remember speaking to his father like that, and he felt limp, relieved, and guilty, as though he'd vomited on the rug. Crazy things plagued him. What if he had a heart attack because of him? What if he suffered a stroke, and spent his remaining years blanketed in a wheelchair, glaring accusations from a lopsided face? He should have taken his father's age into account. But damn it all, when did his father ever take his age into account? Never. He was always thinking him younger than he actually was; always. He was on the point of going after the old man when he heard him coming slowly down the stairs, and

Stanton turned to see a look of placid hospitality. His father was waving a small notebook. "I've begun a little hobby, to keep my mind clear. At my age, one is apt to forget things, to find concentrating difficult. Did you know that the brain cells begin to deteriorate at a very early age? Lack of work, like legs, I expect. So -each day I look up an unfamiliar word, write it down, and use it on somebody, usually poor Mrs Addison. If I'm alone, the goldfish have to hear it. I'm up to the r's now. Refulgence. Do you know that?"
"No-"
"Well, your work makes that unlikely, I should think. Our Wheels Do You A Good Turn hardly represents literary inventiveness, does it?" Suddenly, his father took a swift step forward and locked Stanton in an awkward embrace, inadvertently jabbing him in the shoulder blade with the edge of the notebook.
"I'm sorry we've quarrelled. I think I've been a good father, wouldn't you agree?"
"Sure you have. You always have." Stanton let him move first. He knew somehow that was important. "What does the word mean?"
"Refulgence? Radiant, of a shining quality. Like your bride, perhaps."
"Will you come, Dad? Will you think about it?"

Stanton worked his way back through rush-hour traffic, knowing Chivers wouldn't mind, since he thought he was out demonstrating. That night he sold a refulgent Shrimp to a young suburban couple, whose apricot poodle lifted a shorn leg to piddle on the whitewalls. The couple, laughed, and Stanton laughed and said wasn't that the way a dog marked off his territory. He felt better, making a sale after a day like that. But Chivers, breathing onion, came

over all restless gleam and darting eyes to lace congratulations with a little hemlock.
"Christ, Trev, you could have brought them up to something bigger! What the hell do you mean talking them into a six? Especially when the eights aren't moving? They'd have bought my table with skies on it, if I had 'em. Well, use the old follow-up when it's delivered. Keep the hooks in. Don't let them get satisfied!"
Chivers eyed himself in a side-view mirror of the car he leaned on, narrowing his eyes and jutting his chin as he tugged at the tie, a kind of frowning satisfaction worrying his meaty face. "Sure, we're supposed to push Shrimps," he said. "But a smart guy knows they're lost leaders, eh?" Let them think it's a kennel for their stupid dog, get 'em wondering why they don't move up to the big time. Psychology, Stanton. *That's* what sells, and that's what'll win you a trip to Florida." Chivers straightened up and punched him companionably. "Don't get left on the beach, that's my advise, high and dry. I'd like to see your name up there with the month's winners, okay?"

A heat wave hit Toronto the day before the wedding, side-winding up through the central states, settling like a wet washcloth over the city. A baleful orange sun throbbed through the day and dropped at night like a piece of rotten fruit. By Thursday afternoon, humidity had built so that bits of shade were as cloying as mould, and sailboats on the bay drooped like shot birds on the still water. Stanton and Fred Bailey, a mechanic with Chivers who had the afternoon off, drove through the burning streets, joking with each other in high senseless voices neither recognized. In Stanton's mind, working quite apart from the voice that bantered, two conflicting thoughts kept teletyping a message: *get there on time....don't hit*

anybody for chrissake! The real meaning of what he was about to do had struck him early in the day, when he shaved before the bathroom mirror. It happened suddenly, as if he had plunged himself headfirst into a barrel of crushed ice. He was going to commit himself to someone else, if not totally, then about as totally as any human being could. They had fought feebly once or twice about her mess and his neatness, ending arguments or prickling silence in a lunge for each other's bodies, in oneness where no conflict got in the way. Stanton had watched his own hand quivering in the mirror, startled that he had nerves. Like his father. The Stanton Nerves that began somewhere in the centre of the back and fanned out like electricity, numbing the fingertips and knotting neck muscles. In a second of panic, he saw clearly her pantyhose over the shower rail, her contraceptive foam beside his shaving foam, her cd's mixed in with his. The moment passed, as his mother's cool, plotting blood swept quietly over the nerves: it was worth it. Whatever love was, he felt it for Jan, who was, if he were truthful, just slightly messier than he...

"Hey, turn here," directed Bailey. He was enjoying himself. Hunched on the edge of the seat, wearing a windbreaker of imitation leather over an open-necked shirt, keeping the bridegroom happy. How the hell he could stand that thing on him in this weather baffled Stanton, but he felt only gratitude that he had agreed to be a witness. Bailey was one of those men who never seemed to get depressed, or worry about pensions and the weather. He'd walk on those strong bandy legs through a snowstorm or a heat wave with the same jauntiness, wearing the windbreaker, his red kinky hair threaded with frozen or melting brilliantine. He was a man who was most at home with heavy tools in his hand, in the oily

murk and clang of the shop; and afterwards, strangling a bottle of beer, exchanging dirty jokes in an almost innocent, street-corner yearning for information.

Stanton liked him better than the salesmen because he was not tainted with competition, not made furtive by the need to get ahead. He was where he was -and anyway, he'd offered at nearly the last minute to step in for Stanton's friend, who had contracted mumps from a young son and was at home watching his ears slowly disappearing behind a bloated face.

"Right here," Bailey waved a blunt bitten finger at a vacancy in the underground parking-"and for God's sake take it easy! Chivers can spot a hairline scratch."

They walked through the steamy odours of downtown, jogged across Bay after a long red light and up the stairs in to the old City Hall. At once, their voices, pitched for the clamour outside,rang back at them in harsh echoes. "Up there," said Stanton, pointing to the marble stairs breaking like waves on either side of the stained glass window -"to the right-"

In the upstairs hallway, they opened the glass door with *Weddings* printed across it in the same stern, reproaching type used on doors of offices where fines were paid in sulky silence by law-breakers. The crowd inside dismayed Stanton for a moment, as he stood uncertainly, awash in sweat and nerves. People were everywhere, lounging in chairs, propped against the walls, standing in excited bunches. Stanton half expected to see them dangling from the lights, or hung like pictures, from hooks.

"See anybody y'know?" asked Bailey, dancing at his side. Someone they could not see droned "Gaylord? The Gaylord party, please." And a thin boy with acne and a look of haunted, desperate passion leaped to his feet, pulling a round-faced solemn girl who looked as if she

might be going into a dentist's office. "Christ!" whispered Bailey. "They could be my kids! They gotta be nuts, eh?" A look of sudden and punishing puritanism, of middle-aged outrage at the indecency of it all, made Bailey appear very different. It was impossible to link him with the man who grinned and liked to tell a raunchy joke about the old man and the young girl. slapping his thick thighs at the punch line. Stanton's eyes swept the smoky room until he found her, and simultaneously he and Jan broke into grins of relief. "Over this way" -he nudged Fred and made for the corner, moving sideways, cleaving through the crowd. Somehow they had managed to get chairs, and Stanton after boisterous introductions and explanations, sat down.
"We late?" he asked. "They haven't passed us, have they?" He grinned at Jan's sister, who looked as if she'd worn leaf lettuce; her dress was petalled in some mysterious way, and fluttered distractingly when she moved. "No," she looked limply at Jan, who she might be thinking was a traitor, wearing a plain beige pantsuit. "We only got here ten minutes ago. Sure is hot. *And* crowded." Stanton turned to his mother, who had lit a cigarette and surveyed the room with removed pleasure. "How did you manage to get chairs, Mom?"
"*I* certainly didn't get them," she laughed, a dimply light laugh out of character with her rather severe, watchful face. Stanton liked her, looking expensively good at seventy-six, groomed and hatted and smart, with the thinly elegant legs of a thoroughbred. She looked younger than his father, though she had more lines in her leathery, tanned face. She leaned comfortably forward, resting one gloved hand on his knee. "Your *Dad* got them, Trev, wouldn't you know?"
"He's here?"

She nodded. "In the john at the moment. He just came in here and re-arranged one whole corner, pairing people off, shuffling them around until he got six together. Typical. But people pay attention to him. I guess we'd still be standing if it wasn't for him." She sighed with what sounded like fondness. "Miles always did play to the crowd. A certain haughty, colonel's air about him."
"Well, he wasn't a colonel."
"No, but he *looks* like one, even now. And he's always acted like one. That was one of our problems, of course," his mother said lightly, tapping an ash into the chrome tray. Stanton wanted to ask her what made him change his mind, what made him come through this heat to a ceremony he didn't approve of; but it was possible that she could not know about his deception through the years, pretending that she was dead. Who could tell her that? She looked contented enough, had told Stanton how much fun it was to be back for a little visit -her words- and got on pleasantly with Jan. "Look," she said, "here he comes. Doesn't he look like he's inspecting, though?"
Stanton found him in the crowd without hesitation. Aloof, pleasant, parting the people with his steady walk and no-nonsense bearing. A little smile to one side, a nod to the other, a practiced forbearance of odd accents and sweat and noise. *My God*, thought Stanton, *he's more at home here than I am*. His father had dressed in grey pants with a crease so narrow and straight that it seemed accomplished by plumb-line or mathematics rather than Gibson's Cleaners; the shirt was sharply white, smooth behind a dotted navy and red tie; and on his blue blazer he had pinned the ancient and intricate Death Or Glory of his regiment.
"*Well*, Trevor," his father bent slightly, shaking hands strongly,"this is the day, then."

Stanton shot to his feet and there was more confusion and geniality as he introduced his father to Fred Bailey. But his father took over, immediately smothering his order for everybody to sit down with a warm smile. He wanted Jan on one side of him, Trevor on the other ("Good of you, Bailey, to fill in like this on such short notice"), and he was firmly placed beside Jan's sister.

"It was good of you to come, Dad," Stanton said. "I appreciate it."

His father's left eyebrow made a hairy hill, raised in surprise. "Why would I miss it? My youngest son marrying a bright, lovely girl."

Jan leaned forward and her gold hair braided a lanky tassel across the old man's jacket. "We thought this terrible heat might bother you. It's quite bad, isn't it?" But Stanton's father gave his indulgent chuckle.

"Nothing. Try southern India before a monsoon for heat! *Every* day rutilant with sun" -Stanton decided he had reached the *ru's*- "but one adjusts," his father ended evenly, glancing at Stanton's mother, whose eyes had assumed a glassy, polite boredom. She had heard it all before, and seemed already aboard the jet back to Calgary and Ralph.

"STANLON? THE STANLON PARTY?" The room fell still, ignoring the newly married couple ushered out gently before the magistrate. "Could that be Stanton?" Jan whispered. She stood slowly, and Stanton saw his father's eyes swing to her in open admiration. "I believe you mean Stan*t*on," she said firmly, standing straight, and gracefully adjusting the heat drooped rose on her lapel.

The office was dark-panelled, cool, stripped down of intimidating material. As if the city had cornered the market in chrysanthemums, another pot stood blazing on

the corner of the desk. Before the judge lay a small worn book, a bulbous jug of water and a glass, and the marriage license. "Well, then, are we ready? Now if the witnesses will stand just behind -that's it. Fine. And the bride and groom here, please." The judge raised the book, and as he tilted his head back the light caught his round glasses, so that Stanton was confronted with a legal Daddy Warbucks, doing away with any solemnity he might have felt. It didn't help, either, to have Bailey, who had asked for permission, dipping and dodging clumsily around with his Instamatic, trying for artfully angular shots. "-do hereby pronounce you to be, man and wife." The judge moved around the desk to shake their hands, and Bailey contorted himself, streaming with sweat, to capture the moment forever on film. Stanton hugged Jan, kissed her a little self-consciously because her sister was snuffling just beside him. The whole thing had taken about ten minutes. He could not bear to look his father in the eye right away. Everything he'd said was true. The commotion, the garish yellow and blue waiting room, even the flowers.

They stood together for a time outside in the hall, laughing and talking, until Stanton's mother said she would miss her plane and Bailey said yeah, he had to go, too. Eventually, only Stanton and *his wife* -he said it in his mind, carefully and wonderingly -were left with his father.

"It wasn't what you wanted, Dad, but I'm damned glad you were there. Can we drop you somewhere?"

"No, no. I think I'll just rattle around down here for a while. It's been some time since I came downtown. It's changed." He said it heroically, something he was more apt to do with simple phrases, but tinged slightly with annoyance, as though he should have been consulted. "I may surprise you one day, and take an apartment down here.

You know, it's not always good to live too far out."
When they turned at the stairs to wave, he was examining the stalled golden cage of the original elevator, suavely lecturing someone they could not see on the joys of antiquity. ◂

The Frog In The Pail

I've got two good friends, Kris and Timothy Trotter,
Who found me one day in some glucky swamp water -
Now I live on their porch in a pail, with supplies
Of huge hairy insects and crunchy Black Flies.

Sometimes I sneak out just to wade in the muck -
(They *hate* that -they think I'm a prince! *Their* bad luck-)
But they do let me swim in the shallow blue creek
Which is neat, 'cause I swim like a FLASHING green streak!

I love it down there, where there's fresh stuff to eat -
Where I dive and I swim, then use rocks for a seat.
I flip-flop and float, and I show off some more,
Then I wave at my friends - waiting back on the shore.

That's when I noticed this *strange* thing about them-
The just STAND in the water, like old Auntie Em!
They don't swim the way I do, all over the place,
They're scared that the water might get on their face!

By day, they watch others, in lakes and in pools,
Having all of the fun, knowing all of the rules.
They told me they dream about swimming at night -
Says Kris: "In our dreams, we do *everything* right."

Says Tim: “In our dreams our whole HOUSE is a pool -
And the water’s just great, not too high, not too cool.

We dive down - down - down to the floor to explore
Weird fish and pink shells by the living room door!”

To a frog, their dream story is too strange to hear -
Swimming in dreams, but by day full of fear?
What they needed were lessons, and someone to care,
Then they’d swim with me - one *more* thing we’d share.

Now their Mom is a lady I really like well -
She doesn’t mind insects and thinks frogs are swell.
She drove to the pool with the children in tow
And asked: “Will you teach them to swim? They don’t know- ”

Well, the pool was quite big - their bathtub was smaller:
The water was wavy, and deeper, and TALLER -
But the two kids crept in, a bit shy as they tried,
And clung very tight to the wet, cool pool-side!

Said the teacher: “Now you’ll see how to learn to love water;
Just relax and have fun” - and she smiled at both Trotters.
“First, let’s hold our breath, like we do when we’re mad -
Then splash water around, like a fish when it’s glad!”

Yahoo! As I watched, Kris and Timothy Trotter
Practiced sticking their faces in all that great water!
Soon they held their breath easily, right up to TEN,
Then they’d blink off the droplets- and dunk down again!

In no time they'd found out that floating was fun -
They'd drift on the water like lilies in sun,
And copy the jelly-fish, far out at sea
By bobbing like corks, calm, and happy, and FREE!

"This is great!" they both hollered, "We had water all wrong-
We're learning to SWIM, and it's not taking long!"
As a frog, and a friend, I was proud when they did it -
They both SWAM THE POOL! And I gave a loud RIBET!

This may sound like the end of my story, I know -
They're swimming - I'm happy - the end of the show.
But a funny thing's happened, or that's how it seems -
Now Tim and Kris Trotter *don't* swim in their dreams!

They're dreaming a *new* thing - they're up in the sky
Roaring 'round in a plane! They dream THEY CAN FLY!!
Now it's *my* turn to quiver, to shake my head "No!" -
The sky isn't water - up there I can't go.

That's just great for people, but what about frogs?
The best *we* can do it leap off high logs!
But my friends did a hard thing when they got in the water
So shouldn't *I* try to be brave like the Trotters?

The answer is YES, for at least I can try -
Who knows? I love water, and I might love the sky.
So look up one day - if you see something green -
THAT'S ME AND THE TROTTERS IN OUR FLYING MACHINE! ◂

47

SUBWAY SONG

Considering where she came from, and why she'd left, you can't blame her for being seduced by the mall, at least in the beginning. Mary Ann Peck had grown up in one of those bleak, jobless little clumps that are left to wither by the country roadside when all the modern improvements are going on in a real town twenty-five miles down the road, so by the time she was twenty-two, whatever charms Burleigh's Corners once had were gone. All that remained was a one-pump gas station with a gaping washroom door and three stubborn old houses. Until a year ago, Mary Ellen lived with her family in the middle one, the grey frame with 'ANTIQUES' burnt into a board her Dad had nailed up by the front door. The bus that lumbered through Burleigh's Corners twice a day took an hour to get her to a job she hated, and when the snow stormed in from the east -always too early in October, always suffocating everything around for miles- something close to cabin fever buried Mary Ellen Peck as well. Nobody had to ask why she was leaving, and nobody tried to talk her out of it.

What a difference from the mall where she worked now! It's glittering corridors had no weather, no seasons, not even a detectable time of day, and it took her only fifteen minutes on the subway to get there. And if home-sickness or panic sometimes struck, Mary Ellen only had to remember what it was like working for Gil's Chicken Rodeo and her courage came back. Never again would she wait on tables wearing that dumb cowboy hat, and she wouldn't have nightmares that she was being scraped off a plate with those dead-grub French fries into Gil's garbage can.

Working at Farraday's Fashions had more than lived up to the ad she'd answered: *Sell sophisticated fashions in a challenging and exciting midtown mall*!

During her interview the manager, who'd insisted on being called Courtney, kept smiling and nodding her way through the application form. "Great, great! So, you've sold stuff before, right?"

Mary Ellen told her she'd worked in antiques and left it at that. Then Courtney said her application sure looked great, *rilly* great. It was obvious Mary Ellen was a hard worker, something Mr. Farraday was big on, and she herself rilly liked Mary Ellen's manners, which you were lucky if you hardly ever *got* these days, right? So, except for one last thing, as far as Courtney was concerned, the job was hers. All she had to know was if Mary Ellen was willing to do the window display on top of her selling duties? Farraday would tell her what he wanted so there was nothing to it. Mary Ellen figured she'd been the first applicant to say yes to decorating the window because she got the job and with it the ten percent employee discount on Farraday's merchandise. But what she loved more than anything else about working in the mall was the shiver of anticipation she felt every morning. For the first time in her life, she didn't know who she'd meet or exactly what she'd be doing in an hour's time because something new was always going on. There'd be free make-overs done by gorgeous women with names like Sable and Ashley, women who were only doing this until there modeling careers took off or they got a part in a soap opera. Another day there'd be the sudden black shouldering of police on their way to some unseen crime down the way, or Courtney would rush in to announce that Tom Cruise was filming in front of the

Pierogi Place in Food Fair. "No, I'm *serious*! Tom *Cruise*!" Another big plus was the fact that Mr. Farraday only turned up when he wanted the windows changed or to check the books. Once a month he'd sit at a table in the tiny back office and frown his way through the accounts Courtney kept as neat as a pin. Nothing ever seemed to be wrong, but he'd never compliment her. When Mary Ellen mentioned this, Courtney said she could care less, *she* knew who was running the store, right? What drove her *rilly* nuts were those dumb signs Farraday plastered all over the place. 'Girls! Keep this drawer locked at night! Girls! Bags cost money! Use the right size for each item!' The minute Farraday left the store Courtney would teeter around on those skinny icicle heels ripping down the signs and fuming -who did that big jerk think they were, anyway, ten year olds?

It took only a couple of months working in the mall for Mary Ellen to realize that not only was the place totally alienated from the city above -it ran on a time warp that dictated when and how she'd dress Farraday's window. During a fierce February snowstorm she'd be arranging huge wooden tulips around the Spring dresses in the window. By mid-July she'd already scattered plastic autumn leaves under mannequins huddled in wool skirts and sweaters, so it didn't come as much of a surprise to discover that Mr. Farraday was back pedaling Christmas into Halloween. "*Exmas*, Mary Ellen -that's the biggie! We're the first store customers see when they come through the subway doors so we cash in on that. We get the tree, the whole exmas shebang in the window right after Halloween, okay? That way we catch your early shoppers and have an excuse to get the January Sale banners in the window before Christmas." By now it was

clear to Mary Ellen that even if the real world Up There had an accurate calendar and people dressed for the real weather, she was expected to leave that reality at the top of the escalator before she made her way down to never-never land, and Mr. Farraday's bottom line.

She'd got to like the sound of the subway musicians, especially in December when they cheered her station with popular carols and souped-up versions of Greensleeves. But today's music was very different. Rising above the refugee clomp of winter boots she heard the high, haunting music of a classical violin, all the more welcome because it seemed out of place. Squirreling her way through the crowds she finally got to the corridor wall where she could see who was playing. The first thing she noticed was his expression. No phony smile, no extravagant body motions to draw attention, and money. Instead, he stood very straight, very still, as if nothing around him could matter as much as the music he played. If someone dropped money in the violin case at his feet he'd just murmur *Much obliged*, like a cowboy in an old western, then close his eyes and go right on playing. Mary Ellen knew nothing about classical music, but even when *Rudolph* began bleating out from the record store across from Farraday's, the song the violinist had played that morning stayed with her all day.

When she left for home that night he was still there, sipping coffee and taking the last drags on a drooping home-made cigarette. Mary Ellen turned quickly back into the mall and waited until she heard him playing before venturing out again. This time his music was full of breathtaking runs that made people stop to watch and drop more money in the case. When he settled the violin solidly into the crook of his neck and began the piece that

had lured her out of the stampeding crowd that morning, her pleasure must have shown on her face because when he'd finished, the violinist looked right at her as if he'd seen the question in her eyes. "It's Wagner," he said, sounding a little shy. "His Siegfried Idyll. Well, part of it, anyway. I really need more people to do it properly."

"I wish I knew more about your kind of music, " Mary Ellen said. "Back home it was mostly country and rock."
That's when he told her the story behind the music, how Richard Wagner had composed the Idyll as a Christmas present for his wife. "He actually had the musicians line up on his hall staircase Christmas morning so it would be the first thing she'd hear when she woke up. He wasn't the nicest guy in the world, but that must have been one of his finer moments." Richard was his name, too, he told Mary Ellen, but when she gave him hers, he said he'd rather call her Ellen if she didn't mind. "Ellen," he said firmly.
"I think it suits you better."

After that, whenever the violinist saw her coming he'd begin the Idyll so she'd hear some of it before going into work. Soon they were sharing their personal histories over coffee breaks and cheap lunches in the Food Fair. Both were from out-of-town, but although Richard had been in the city longer than Mary Ellen, she'd had more luck finding a job. "I'm a good violinist," Richard told her without embarrassment, "but I'm down here in the subway because nobody needs a good violinist. I'd love to be playing in a string quartet, but that's daydreaming. Right now I'd settle for a decent job and an apartment of my own."
"So where are you living now?"
"With a guy I knew back home. Just temporary I hope."
Mary Ellen told him about her one-room-with-bath, what

selling was like inside the mall, and how she'd decorated Farraday's Christmas window. "Mostly my boss's idea, even the sign in the window, but at least I'm getting to know the merchandise display room where all the props are stored."
"Okay if I see it on my way out?"
"I don't mind, but it isn't really mine. I just did what I was told."
Ten minutes later the violinist stood in front of Farraday's, staring at the window. "So that's his idea of Christmas? *Let's Party*? I'm glad it isn't yours because it's just like all the others, pure commerce."

His comment had stung, but she knew he was right. In the past two months she'd watched the mall turn into one huge, glittery come-on. Forty-foot gold Christmas trees towering at both entrances. Santa's Crystal Palace chaotic with dazed children, crying babies and bored adult elves. Carols, played too early and too often, that had lost their original meaning. Like Mr. Farraday had told her last October, in the mall, *Exmas* was the biggie. *Exmas* was money.

Maybe Richard could see it so clearly because he spent his days on the outside, playing his lovely music in a clammy grey place that desperately needed some warmth and beauty. It was there that he'd made his gift to her of the same music a composer had written for his wife that long-ago Christmas morning. It was in front of Farraday's window that he'd let her know what his own idea of Christmas really was -something uniquely personal, something unexpected you did for someone else. And suddenly, Mary Ellen had a wonderful, wacky, *original* idea. Why not? After all, Farraday's mannequins had been partying beside that tacky pink Christmas tree since

Halloween, and in a couple of days the January Sale signs had to go in, signs that sounded like ads for a horror movie: *Drastic Cuts! Everything Slashed To The Bone!* Farraday was off tomorrow morning for a Florida Christmas, and she knew Courtney could care less what was in the window.

By the time she'd climbed onto the packed train that night, Mary Ellen knew exactly what she was going to do. She found the old-fashioned wigs, the period clothes and props she needed in the merchandise display room and carted them back to the store to begin the happy work of dismantling Mr. Farraday's window. Off came the gaudy jewelery, the lacquered blonde wigs, the holly-green cocktail dresses. Back into boxes went the arms and legs of the bald mannequins, the shedding pink-flocked tree, the plastic snowflakes. "The party's over, Mr. Farraday," Mary Ellen whispered, and removed his sign from the bare window. Only the echoing whine of a vacuum cleaner reminded her that the mall had closed. It took her over two hours to finish the window. She'd never worked with male mannequins before, the wigs looked a little lopsided and the spelling on the new sign was foreign to her. But finally it was done, and she plugged in a small peach spotlight and went outside to see how the window looked from across the corridor.

Okay, so maybe the browns and beiges didn't exactly leap out at you, and one of the violinists *was* teetering dangerously close to the edge of a step, but what she saw filled her with pride. She'd actually brought the Siegfried Idyll to life in a narrow hallway where four wigged men stood on a spiral staircase playing their plastic violins. Strung on invisible thread above their heads were the same silvery cardboard notes music stores used, only Mary

Ellen had hers disappearing around the corner of the upstairs hall toward the unseen bedroom And the stairway was brushed with what was suppose to be peach dawn light... In the whole mall, not even in the whole big city above it could there be another window like this one. It was her own creation, and tomorrow morning, it would be her Christmas present to the violinist.

The moment she stepped off the subway train she knew something was wrong. No music entertained the hoards of shoppers waiting for the mall to open. When she asked the security guard if he'd seen the violinist, he told her the night guard had caught him sleeping inside last night.
"You're serious? Inside the *mall*?"
"We figure he hid inside until closing. Our night guy found him curled up under one of them fake tropical plants the travel place has in its Caribbean display? Know the one I mean? Anyway, they got him upstairs now."

Desperate to find some way she could help, Mary Ellen raced through the doors and straight into Mr. Farraday, who was standing plum-faced with fury in front of her Siegfried Idyll window. "This your idea of a joke, Mary Ellen? Wanna tell me what *that's* suppose to sell? What's that sign *mean*, somebody's idol, and who the hell are those guys with violins?"

Mary Ellen decided there wasn't much point in trying to explain any of it to a man who'd actually use the storm delay of his flight to Miami to check his sale windows. There was nothing she could do but strip the whole display, knowing that Richard would never see his present from her, and both of them could lose their jobs. But after Farraday saw his disaster sale signs zig-zagging across the store window he relented. Hell, he said, it was Exmas so he'd let it go this time. But if Mary Ellen was going to be

a member of the Farraday team, from now on she'd better remember what display windows were really for.

And, Mary Ellen thought, all of this happening on the twenty-fourth, when the mall was jammed with last minute shoppers and the record store across from Farraday's was pumping a twangy country version of 'O Holy Night' into her ears. She was hoping she could just get through this miserable day when she heard a familiar sound barely penetrating the racket around her.

"Did you hear that, Courtney?"

"What?"

"That odd scraping sound?"

"Not me, honey. Hey, I stopped listening down here months ago. In fact my idea of a *rilly* great Christmas is total silence. No people, no music."

"That's it!"

"You bet. That's what I just said."

"No, I mean that scraping sound. It's Richard tuning up! Can you hold the fort for just a minute? I've got to know what happened."

She rushed out into the subway to find the violinist in his usual spot by the wall, eyes closed in concentration, calmly tuning his violin. "You're not fired! But why didn't you come in and *tell* me? I was going crazy not knowing-"

"Banned from the Mall 'til my contract's up," Richard said. "They didn't fire me because I didn't *technically* break in, but I've been banned from the Mall until my contract is up. That's why I had to wait for you to come out."

"But why did you do it? The storm wasn't that bad."

"Not if you have a place. I wasn't telling you the truth when I said I was staying with a friend. I use hostels, but if they're full I sleep on church steps or over a subway vent. So with the blizzard last night I thought, hey, the

mall's warm and empty, why waste that Caribbean display?"
"I wish you'd told me, I could have helped."
The violinist shook his head. "No way I'd involve you. But you know what? It got me thinking that you *could* actually live down here full-time, like the Phantom of the Mall. It's got everything. Great weather, food, clean washrooms. Anyway, the hassle was worth it. As they were marching me outside I saw your Siegfried window -"
"You saw it? I'm glad because it's gone now. Farraday made me take it out this morning."
"Think of it as instant art, like the musicians did who played for Wagner's wife. It was beautiful. I loved it -"
He began a bad tic-toc version of Frosty the Snowman, a classical musician out of his depth when he tried to be shallow. Right away a woman sent her small boy over to drop a toonie in his case. "See that?" Richard laughed. "If I decided to stay down here and play only what people recognize, and spent my nights in the mall the way you spend your days, I bet I'd end up believing there was nothing to go back up *for*."
"Not you," Mary Ellen said. "Listen, I have to get back. I don't want to leave Courtney alone when we're so busy. But let's have lunch so we can talk, okay?"
Richard reminded her that he wasn't allowed in the mall.
"I know, but I was getting sick of the Food Fair, anyway."
"It's Christmas Eve," Richard said, "so why not let me treat you to a hot turkey sandwich?"

He didn't really have to specify *where*. He didn't have to say *outside*, or *up there*, in the real world. When she came back a half-hour later he was in his windbreaker, the violin under his arm, waiting for her. ◂

The Wallpaper Man

Ed Innes was standing on the meagre lawn of his house and trying to imagine the unimaginable. With his hands planted on his blocky hips and the sun glinting off his glasses the way it was glancing off the windows, Ed even *looked* a little like his house. It was as if he'd grown up in it sensibly keeping his body size and 5'5" height within the squat proportions and low headroom of the bungalow.

Nothing had changed since his parents bought the house in 1950, one of eight little houses exactly the same, all built at the beginning of the second world war to accommodate munition workers, all strung around the scythe-shaped crescent. The roof and steps were - fittingly - Battleship Grey, the shingled siding was pale cream, the door bottle green, a colour combination that gave the place the anonymity of a cardboard carton. But that's what Ed liked about it. Since he'd been born with the ability to do a fast fade-out into any background himself, a house that did the same thing suited him just fine.

He'd only been tempted by marriage once, an impulse that fizzled the moment his practical mind totted up the changes he'd have to make. Placid by nature and almost totally without imagination, it had never occurred to Ed Innes that he might just be missing something. After that, he'd been content to live with his parents until they died and left him the house. In this way, Ed was more like his mother than his dad, who'd always had the knack of being able to picture ideas and their results like a slide show in

his head. Still, most of the changes his dad made were indoors. "Guess I'm strictly an inside man, Grace," he'd tell Ed's mother when she "wondered" about putting a fence around the front law. *I wonder if it wouldn't look nicer closed in, Lou?* Any personal notions like that were dangled at arm's length, almost indifferently, so she could back off fast if Ed's dad didn't like them. But large-scale, open-air renovations never did interest Lou Innes. While the neighbours added aluminum awnings, window boxes, fancy metal railings and foot-high brass numbers, his dad was happier doing internal wonders with paint, and his even greater passion, wallpaper.

Unrolling yet another scene-changing design against the tiny living room wall, he'd declare that wallpapering was a hell of a lot easier and cheaper than moving. "It's the same thing as in nature, Ed. It's colour and pattern that changes the world. Can't you just *see* this baby, clear across the
wall and into the alcove over there?" But, of course, Ed couldn't see. All he saw were a couple of flowers, maybe a bit of a vase with ribbons - only as much as the unfolded roll revealed, nothing more. And as he stared at his house now, he still couldn't image what *it* would look like, either, when he was finished doing the most daring thing he'd done in his life. But then, how could anybody imagine it, even his dad if he was alive, when, as far as Ed knew, no one had done anything like it before? Maybe, like a lot of other things, it could only be an act of faith.

But whatever Ed Innes lacked in imagination he made up for in his ability to vividly recall past events. Right now he was remembering the day he'd followed his parents through that same green front door on the heels of a real estate agent who'd looked to him like an endless grey overcoat, huge and shouldery and full of confidence.

While his dad prowled the place grim-lipped, testing floors for true with his plumb-line and feeling walls for dampness, Ed's mom just smiled her way from one room to the next, gazing out of the windows. Noticing this, the agent had given Ed a quick wink as he edged closer to her: "Great place for a youngster, eh, Mizz Innes? Who needs a big backyard with a whole field to play in? And the Hydro cuts the grass for you, too". He'd tapped a cigarette out of the package then, and Ed watched, fascinated, as he flicked off the ashes progressively through their tour: into his pant cuff in the hall, into the kitchen sink, and once in a closed corner when he didn't think anyone was looking. When they finally reached the bathroom he drowned the butt in the toilet.

By this time, they'd seen all there was to see, and Ed remembered how they'd congregated in the small living room, staring out the window at the mirror image of the house across the street. "Wartime housing, of course, "the agent declared, his voice booming off the bare walls like cannon-fire." But our lads in the service got first pick of them when they came home." He'd slapped a huge paw against the nearest wall and said "Solid little places, by golly. Low upkeep. Couldn't do better for a small family, I'd say." That's when Ed's dad, who wasn't given to touching him, suddenly slung an arm around his thin shoulders and said: "Well, that's us. We figure Ed here is *it*." Which was how Ed first found out he'd probably grow up an only child, a discovery that had filled him with relief. That's when they'd all trooped outside and walked around the house very slowly, as if somebody had mined it during those turbulent war years. The agent rustled some papers and remarked how close the house was to Elite Wallcoverings, where Ed's dad had worked since he was a

'teen-ager. "Just a couple of blocks east of here, isn't it? Maybe ten, fifteen minutes walk at the outside?" Considering how his father thought anybody who spent an hour just getting to and from his work had to be crazy, this was a smart move on the agent's part. He'd climbed into his Chevy, shouting that a bargain like this baby wouldn't last forever, then drove away. Lou Innes pursed his lips and squinted at the house, walked around it once more, then hustled them into the old DeSoto. "Wouldn't need this old crock, would we?" Ed's mom got that funny, hard look on her face, as if she was thinking: *It's all right for you, but what about me? Where are the stores?* Out loud she'd said, "I wonder if there's a grocery store close by?" As they drove off, she'd turned around for one last look. "Know something, Lou? If there wasn't a for-sale sign on the lawn I'm not sure I'd know which house we'd just seen."

They'd moved in just as the surrounding factories were converting back to peacetime production, and in the home-decorating boom, Ed's dad was excited about the new acrylic paint and the wide choice of patterns and colours of the new easy-off wallpaper. Soon, he was bringing home all the reject rolls, end -of-lines and new samples he could get his hands on. Anything bare enough to qualify was papered. Ivy Trellis crept all over the pint-sized kitchen, even across the cupboard doors for what Ed's dad called 'a unified look'. And in Ed's bedroom, Spitfires blazed across his walls under a ceiling of fluorescent stars. When Ed's dad ran out of walls or objects to decorate, he turned the little front hall into his tester-space. Here he hung vibrating strips of third-dimensional, abstract or exotic papers, so the first few minutes inside the door Ed

always felt as if he'd wandered into a carnival crazy house. Ed was sure this was the reason *he* ended up working for Elite Wallcoverings, too. He'd never heard anything but enthusiasm for the company and the product. On the night Ed told his dad he'd applied there for a job, Lou Innes couldn't have been happier. "Great place, the plant," he'd beamed. "Seeing the patterns running off the presses, old stand-bys like your mother's Rose and Ribbons there, or new modern stuff you've never seen before? Can't beat it, Ed! And it makes the customer *happy*, wallpaper. Changes things when they can't change anything else in their lives. And just you wait. You'll be off that fork-lift in no time, probably be bossing *me* around some day!"

But right from the first day Ed had loved tearing around the huge warehouse floor on the fork-lift, transferring orders from one department to another, loading rolls for delivery on a truck. And he'd only needed to see the plant manager once - an unhappy guy the colour of wallpaper paste, the only one wearing a suit in a place full of grey smocks with a purple 'E' on the pocket - to realize that whatever it was he did, wasn't *half* as much fun as running that fork-lift. Sometime in the future Ed thought he might get as far as the Accounts office - which he eventually did - but he'd only do it for the raise in salary. In this way his life moved steadily into routine, until a good many years began to blend together, like those swimmy cream-on-white moire papers his dad never liked. Then, just after his fifty-seventh birthday, Ed's comfortable routine had been jolted by his mother's sudden death and the fact that he was the only one left who could keep his dad from going crazy after his grudging retirement.

When the weather was good and he felt up to it, his aging dad would amble over to Elite and thumb through the new wallpaper books and the decorating magazines that lay around the reception lobby. Later he and Ed would walk home together, his dad reciting the same old story about how bored he was and if Ed was smart he'd *never* retire. After seeing the papers that were available now, he'd get restless all over again, suggesting he'd do 'a little work' on the walls he wanted to change whenever the whim and a fresh pattern turned up.

"You know," he grumbled gently, "I'm gettin' fed up. It's okay for you, busy doing things away from the house all day. But I get sick of staring at these same damned walls day in and day out." He'd slipped a side-long glance at Ed. "What the living room needs is some of that new scenic stuff I just saw back at the factory. Like that Italian Gardens paper it looks like you can walk right into? Hey, wouldn't *that* brighten up the place, though?" Ed hated to remind him of the fact that he was past wallpapering walls now, so he suggested trying something easier. After all, there was a mini-warehouse of rolls stacked down the basement. Why didn't he think of a way of using up some of them?

They'd been walking the same way home for years - past the dreary stretch of factories neither of them noticed much anymore because they'd got so used to the blackened rug brick, the jail house concrete and the yards where twisted metal, eroding barrels and factory garbage collected behind tall chain-link fences. But as always, his dad saw more possibilities than Ed ever could.

One late afternoon Lou Innes stopped suddenly and waved a hand toward the factories. "Know what I'd like to do, Ed?
Wallpaper over *that* eyesore. No, I mean everything, the whole shebang! Wouldn't that be something, though? A *street* of patterns?" It was obvious the urge to make big changes was still there, but eventually Ed's idea of papering something smaller seemed better to his father than doing nothing at all. There was one problem, he said. The stuff he'd hoarded down the basement wasn't good enough. He had his heart set on Italian Gardens, so Ed brought home enough of the new pattern to keep him happy, and left him to it. More out of politeness than interest he asked one night what he was making, but his dad just smiled and said it was a surprise. He'd see for himself in a few days.

A week later, Ed came up the street to find the house completely dark, and imagined the worst until he saw his dad grinning in the doorway: "Don't you turn on the lights," he ordered, "just come on in here and *stay in the hall*." Ed did as he was told, and waited while his dad stumbled around in the black living room. "Okay," his dad called triumphantly, "how's *this* for starters?" Ed peered round the doorway, and was momentarily stunned at what he saw.

If was as if a huge window had been punched in the side wall and he was looking right through it into a lush garden at the height of summer! For a moment Ed could almost imagine it was possible to walk out there, along the pathway past the fountain to an ornate stone bench tucked into a grove of trees by a distant lake. For it was back lighting that made the scene so magical, giving the effect of a luminous sun setting somewhere in the distance. What the old man had made was a hinged screen about four and

a half feet high, with a roll-width of wallpaper stretched tightly across each panel and a supporting wood frame lacquered in black. Ed couldn't see his dad's face, but he couldn't mistake the new excitement in his voice. "Well? Didn't I *tell* you Italian Gardens was something? Mind you, there's a lamp in behind her now, but you gotta see it in my bedroom window with the sun streaming through! A hell of a lot better that staring at the hydro field, you can bet on that!"

For a few weeks Lou was full of plans as he seemed to get back his old creative energy. He'd make more screens, maybe get Elite interested. After all, it was a great use for all those roll ends, wasn't it? He imagined miniature screens you could put on a table top in front of a lamp, wallpaper blinds, even wallpaper Christmas ornaments. Maybe Elite could put his ideas into *Wondrous Ways with Wallpaper*, their promotional booklet, which meant that, for the first time in his life, his dad's ambitions had reached beyond the four walls of the house.

Elite did include his idea for the screens in their booklet, and featured an interview with Lou Innes, *'Old Boy With New Ideas'* in the company newsletter. But after that, Lou's energy began to gradually drain away again, and he admitted to Ed that, as pleased as he was with the scenic screens, he wished he'd been healthy enough to do something bigger, something *really* spectacular that people would remember all their lives.

Two months later, his dad was confined to bed with a failing heart, and Ed would try to cheer him up with news of the latest changes at Elite Wallcoverings. Now amalgamated with another company and named The Elite Group, they'd added a home accessories branch and a full decorating consultation service. What Ed didn't tell his

dad was that massive re-development would soon change their whole neighbourhood, too. Not so bad that may of the obsolete factories were being replaced with office towers and modern apartments, but Ed didn't have the heart to tell Lou that progress had doomed their small crescent houses as surely as a bombing run would have done during the war: they were to be bulldozed to make way for a shopping mall. Not that Ed minded. He figured his life was about to change anyway, so the fact that he'd have his own apartment only a couple of blocks away from the Elite Group appealed to him now. Still, when his father died, the sense of loss Ed felt surprised him: the house that had been his dad's art gallery from the day they moved in seemed to have lost its reason for being. But there was consolation in the fact that the old man hadn't lived to see his eccentric walls scraped like so much used gift wrap, and all that hidden creativity reduced to rubble in the space of a day.

Ed's idea wasn't anything like the sudden flashes of inspiration his dad used to get when some wallpaper brainstorm instantly formed a picture in his head. With all the moving to take care of, Ed was wondering what he was going to do with a basement full of old wallpaper. The he remembered the day his dad had said he'd just love to paper over all those ugly factories, a crazy notion maybe, but Lou's idea of the ultimate dramatic creation people would never forget. At first the two thoughts drifted around, unconnected in Ed's mind. But five days before he had to move out and the bulldozers flattened the house, he recalled the sun behind his dad's screen, and Ed knew exactly what he was going to do with all that paper. He'd celebrate Lou Innes with an act he'd appreciate but - being strictly an inside man - would never have done

himself. As usual, no mental image materialized to help Ed picture his finished project. He had to depend on measurements he could work out on paper, and skills that had more to do with exact planning than imagination. Everything would have to be done slowly and deliberately, and timed so that the fitting climax would come that night before he had to leave the house to its fate.

There were no neighbours left on the street to ask curious questions when Ed climbed the ladder to measure the exterior of the house as carefully as his dad used to measure the inside walls. Once he had the dimensions, he began the much messier job of sorting and cutting the long strips of wallpaper that soon turned his living room into a gerbils' cage. He did his best to combine colours and patterns the way he'd seen his father do, then joined the strips into wall-sized sheets with masking tape. Afterwards, they were numbered in the order he'd use them and stacked against the bedroom wall. Now all he needed was dry, windless weather on the day before the bulldozers arrived and plenty of inside light that night.

A young woman walking her Pug saw it first. Even though the dark street was cluttered with dumpsters, the silent hulk of a bulldozer and piles of debris, by habit the choppy rocking gait of the little dog had aimed as always for Ed's crescent. But this night the spectacle that met the woman as she rounded the corner, stopped her cold in her tracks.

It was as if she'd stumbled on some old childhood magic wildly out of place among the empty, blank-eyed houses. At first she'd thought it might be a beautiful tent rippling in the breeze, but as she moved closer, blazes of colour and blurs of pattern shone out from the doors and

windows hidden underneath. And where the hydro field spotlights glanced across it, there were vivid stripes, curved dots that turned out to be flowers, psychedelic zig-zags and fluorescent stars - and silhouetted in what was probably a small bedroom window, Spitfires streaking through clouds.

The woman was wondering how she could possibly describe what she was seeing to her parents.

It's like a quilt, a mammoth quilt tossed over the house. Every colour you can think of - no, I'm serious! On that crescent they're bulldozing to-morrow? Somebody had actually wallpapered the ***outside*** *of the whole house and lit it up from the inside so you see patterns through the windows and doors! You've got to see it!*

Word soon got around, and late into the night people came in cars and on foot, with their kids, their pets and their cameras. A television station sent its remote news crew, and when Ed emerged from under the swath of ivy wallpaper covering the front door, he told millions of people across the country that the papered house was really his dad's idea, a creative project he'd just never got around to doing. Ed figured that would please his dad even more than the space he'd got in Wondrous Ways With Wallpaper.

But next morning, the day he had to move out, Ed was even more pleased when the wreckers told him they were leaving the quilted house to the last so anyone who'd missed it could see it and get the photographs and the wallpaper souvenirs everyone seemed to want before Lou Innes' memorial vanished from the face of the earth. ◂

November Argument

Look outside: Must it bury us again so soon?
Snow turned to slurp, sleet coating wires and
ending light;
Wrists wracked by shovel ringing uselessly on ice;
Diluted sun, thin days, and fatter night
forever butting into afternoon!

Put me on a plane, and point it south.
I'm sick of fighting winter with my mouth.

Then go! I want to feel astringent snow
wild on my skin; to have the new-white lawn
Mowed by the wind and spangled by the feet of birds;
To see true tree shapes spun against a sherbert dawn,
And next springs buds jewelled deep in ice for now...

I cannot pine while you just disappear.
I'll blow my poetry in another's ear. ◂

PUBLISHED FICTION:

Ten short stories for Chatelaine magazine, ('71-'80) several reprinted in Australian and English magazines

A FEW WORDS BEFORE DINNER, ('79) Saturday Night Fall Literary issue

PARADE ON AN EMPTY STREET, ('79) First Novel, published by Clarke-Irwin in Canada St. Martin's Press, U.S.A. - Gage, large print

ARTICLES AND INSIGHT PIECES IN GLOBE AND MAIL'S "WEEKEND" MAGAZINE:

JOAN WHO? ('75) profile on Marketplace's first host, Joan Watson.

OUT OF HIS LEAGUE, ('75) Injured hockey player, Greg Neeld.

IN THE PALACE OF THE SNOW QUEEN, (76) profile of author Sylvia Fraser

THE REPRESSED CHARISMA OF JEANNE SAUVE, ('76)
(Pierre Trudeau's Minister of Communications)

ENTRE AMIS, ('76) U.S.A.'s 200th birthday and our "special relationship"

LAST OF THE BIGTIME BUILDERS, ('77) Profile, Bregman and Haaman, Architects.

LOVE STORY: TWO, ('77) Drama behind Betty Kennedy's second marriage

INSIGHT ARTICLES FOR OTHER PUBLICATIONS ('80 - onwards):

FACT IN FICTION –literary issue, SATURDAY NIGHT – based on letters from many Canadian authors. Bob Fulford publisher

WOUNDS OF PICKERING WON'T HEAL – insight page, TORONTO STAR

POWER AT ANY PRICE – profile, Doris Anderson. THE CANADIAN

FEMINIST IN ACADEME – Dr. Margaret Fulton, Pres. CHATELAINE

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK – Podium piece, MACLEAN'S

THE TERRY EFFECT – profile on Terry Fox, TORONTO LIFE MAGAZINE

...and numerous articles in THE LYCHGATE
{Parish Newsletter of the Church of St. Martins-in-the-Fields}

UNPUBLISHED:

Second Novel: INNOCENT BYSTANDERS

Third Novel: BLISSLAND